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THE ESSENTIAL MATTER OF COMPOSITION.

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TWO MAJOR ISSUES ARE DISCUSSED IN THIS CRITICAL REVIEW OF WILLIAM BUCKLER'S SPEECH TO THE ASSOCIATION OF DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH IN DECEMBER 1967. FIRST, BUCKLER'S INSISTENCE THAT TEACHERS RESTRICT THEMSELVES ONLY TO SUBJECTS WHICH THEY ARE SPECIALLY COMPETENT TO TEACH COULD LEAD TO BOTH A DRASTIC REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF COURSES OFFERED AND A DULL, ROUTINE DEPARTMENT. SECOND, HIS INSISTENCE THAT ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS SHOULD TEACH ONLY LITERATURE AND ELIMINATE ALL COMPOSITION COURSES DENIES BOTH THE STUDENTS' NEEDS AND THE INTEGRAL RELATION BETWEEN COMPOSITION AND LITERATURE. DESPITE SUCH PROBLEMS AS STAFFING, COST, ADMINISTRATIVE ATTITUDES, AND POORLY TRAINED TEACHERS, THE ENGLISH PROFESSION SHOULD NOT ABDICATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR FRESHMAN ENGLISH COURSES. TO ELIMINATE THEM IS TO DENY ONE OF THE STRONGEST POTENTIAL FORCES FOR CULTURE IN THE UNIVERSITY. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 17, MAY 1968, PAGES 19-22. (BN)

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The Essential Matter of Composition

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With much that Dean William Buckler said to the Association of Departments of English in Chicago on December 26, 1967, one can only agree. That we should "put some of our assumptions under the severest scrutiny;" that English departments have not "made a contribution to the American college at all commensurate with their potentialities;" such generalizations are true, and need the further authority of specification. It is when Dean Buckler turns to specificity that one must take exception.

He is right when he points to incompetence in the profession at all levels. The teaching assistant who is teaching composition before he has learned how to write; the senior professor who has never learned to write, and whose response to great writing is a prefabricated sneer or an artificial effervescence; with such types our profession is ridden. We have to work with them; they are our failures. The teaching assistant can often be salvaged--is actively engaged, at his best, in salvaging himself; and some few senior professors can learn a few things, and sometimes do.

If these persons are to learn, however, how can we possibly apply Dean Buckler's statement that "If we eliminated prejudice, however strong, as a qualification for professing, and restricted our courses to our competence, our teaching loads would be considerably lighter"? No doubt if we defined our competence, and that of our colleagues, rigorously enough, we could reduce teaching loads; but to do so would not be to eliminate "prejudice...as a qualification for professing." For if there is one prejudice shared by teaching assistants, senior professors, and everyone else in the Department of English, it is that he possesses a competence, a specialization, which he should be permitted to teach, and which by and large he teaches well. This belief is often enough solidly grounded.

If, however, we exclude all but special competence from our programs, we stultify ourselves and our students. Even in big universities, some courses would have to be eliminated. In many small colleges offerings would be thinned out intolerably, and the intellectual excitement that comes to the staff member preparing a new course, or to the student fleeing the dull routine of the drably fabricated and syllabized and frequently repeated course, would be eliminated. If the reduction of courses is a good thing administratively, if it has a salutary effect on teaching loads, it often leads to one of the very evils Dean Buckler wishes to avoid: the dull and the routine. It is true that onerous teaching loads can make us dull and routine: so can a narrowly conceived notion of our competence.

A prejudice which I find less justifiable, and to which I find Dean Buckler thoroughly committed, is the long-standing belief that composition is less important than literature. He would have the college "get out of the whole business of Freshman English..."and turn its attention to the essential matter of literature." Despite one's agreement that literature is indeed essential--essential to our civilization and to the educational activity which may help it to survive--one is appalled at the denigration of composition which this statement implies. That composition is anything but integral to literature; that literature can be read and valued at a high level by students or teachers not used to experiencing the pain and perplexity and rare triumph of emulating the masters; these are ideas that appall. That composition belongs not first, in the lower level, or last, in the graduate seminar or professional journal, but everywhere and always, at every academic level, appears a thought so central to excellence in the profession of English that one scarcely credits one's ears in hearing composition expelled to the salt mines of the high school or contained in the concentration camp of a "writing center."

Any chairman, leafing through recent folders of applications, can find statements by gauche

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young men to the effect that, having attained the doctorate, they no longer propose to teach Freshman English. As long as they are echoing views from the professional holy of holies, the Chairman's or the Dean's sanctum, they can scarcely be expected to feel the full awkwardness of their position. If their profession does not feel it, how can they?

Dean Buckler proposes that an average SAT verbal score of 625 in a freshman class be taken as an indication that the college or university is ready to abandon Freshman English. Yet his own university announces that a student may be reasonably confident of admission if his SAT verbal score is 600 and his high school grade average is 88.* Not yet, then, does one of the institutions which draws its students largely from a population center which is verbally facile, discourage students whose scores fall below the proposed average. What about the large number of institutions not so favored? The score of 500 is an average score. A glance at the profiles of freshman classes for 1967-1968, published by the College Entrance Examination Board, shows that Dean Buckler's institution does not there publish scores which other institutions publish. Such figures as are offered by other institutions show that only a select few are favored with entering classes having such an average. Dean Buckler then is talking about a situation which exists in only a few highly favored educational centers. Leadership in the profession of English does not consist in pretending that a fact exists which does not in fact exist, and is not likely to exist in the forseeable future.

If, however, such scores prevailed, faith in scores raises persistent doubts. The values of Freshman Composition are not comprised in an examination, however cleverly devised. Administrative convenience and economy may be served by the theory that examinations are a proper measure of attainments as subtle and cultivated as those that are proposed in a good Freshman English course. But education is not served thereby: indeed the student may find himself released for pursuits which humanistically considered are far less valuable--"disciplines" which encourage the systematic invasion of privacy through the questionnaire, the reduction of the individual to a social integer, his alienation from humanity through the minimal gratifications of a computer-based merchandising society and through an exclusively material exploration of the universe. It cannot be the function of the University to aid and abet the depersonalization of society, but to oppose it at every step.

If one wants the job of Freshman English to be done by the high school, one must be willing, for administrative convenience and economy, to overlook the fact that it will not be done. Every experienced professor of English knows that in recommending a student to the public schools he must moderate any assertion of intellectual excellence. The other day a public school administrator telephoned me to inquire whether a candidate's "excellent" academic record meant that he would show too little sympathy with "slow learners." I was astonished: the candidate's record was only modestly above average, and my letter of recommendation had tactfully said so. To my shame, I found myself assuring the administrator that the candidate was not "all that brilliant." Reassured, he hired the applicant. This recent experience only confirms my knowledge that C- students are certain to get jobs teaching English in the secondary schools, and pass on as merits the deficiencies which led them to get C-.

Students trained by such teachers will surely haunt us; they will also haunt graduates of those institutions which have abandoned Freshman English, who will be teaching the subject without having studied it. Thus a tradition will be made of incompetence: an incompetence reinforced by a withdrawal of the elite.

The argument that the universities should not graduate incompetents has its validity: our C- students could have been more firmly graded. This would mean only that they would not be <u>our</u> graduates: in the present market, they would teach anyway, temporarily certified; or they would transfer their D's to the less demanding pseudo-universities and become "fully qualified" to grow old in the service of mediocrity.

Freshman English is not then the only problem, but its abandonment is one step towards the

*<u>Manual of Freshman Class Profiles 1967-1969</u> (N.Y., College Entrance Examination Board),p.678.

dehumanization of the curriculum. Advocates of this step would argue that all college and university teachers should be concerned with writing: as indeed they should be. If, however, competence in composition is the standard, the Department of English has surely some right to claim it, even if claiming it increases the teaching load. To do otherwise is to turn over composition to those of our colleagues in other fields whose expertise chiefly embraces professional jargon, correct spelling, and certain mechanical formalities. To such persons we should not wish to abandon one of our chief competencies. To do so would be to accept tacitly a minimal definition of the course, too common already among laymen and among some colleagues, as correct spelling and punctuation, and to neglect what the course can do, and at its best does do.

The course I am talking about cannot be dismissed by administrators with a wave of the hand as one taught chiefly by people who hang on to jobs grimly at a sub-faculty non-tenure level, or teach for a few years only while they work on doctorates. To the extent that this course exists, it offers a real problem. I do not see how the problem can be solved without upgrading the course and the faculty which teaches it. That will increase the number of hours which must somehow be manned by competent people. It means moreover a new definition of competence: no member of an English staff can be regarded as fully competent who craves exemption from Freshman English. If there are some members of the staff from whom Freshmen should in all charity be saved, they are our professional mistakes.

A bewildering number of methods exist for teaching the Freshman course, and most of them have some validity. I do not feel the embarrassment some of my colleagues feel when confronted, in an anthology, with an article on a subject outside the specialty. As a layman, I read many such articles in periodicals, and they do something to dispel my ignorance: I can do something with them on my inexpert level. More: I can show young students how to do something with them at their level: I can very possibly help them to venture upon new intellectual endeavors, and lead them to hunt the experts who can teach them more. One of the fine functions of English is its function as a vehicle in which to explore new ways. My expertise includes the vehicle, and at least some of the road it will take. My competence and that of my colleagues should not be so severely restricted as to confine us to preparing the vehicle and refusing to accompany our students at least a part of the way. Without a road test, how can we establish that the vehicle is worthy? How can we give directions without knowing part of the way? Let us be permitted then some excursions into unfamiliar territory. Thus we prepare our students for explorations with which English has little directly to do. The status of the course as a required or distribution course depends on how well we can do this part of our job. To give it up to persons working in other disciplines, whose standards of English are wildly diverse, and sometimes so weak as to damage the subject matter, is simply to court delinquency, to be unfaithful to our own discipline.

This is not however our chief defection. <u>That</u> is to culture; if we are the right sort of composition teachers, we will do more for humanity through helping preserve its culture than in any other way. I am not disputing that such claims may be convincingly made for certain other disciplines. A part of what every English composition teacher should be doing is making such claims for other disciplines as well as his own: making the claims, and through manner and attitude, a subtle compound of joy, enthusiasm, delight and respect, leading his students to a life of culture.

The teacher of composition is in this way in a highly privileged position. The image of a person of high general culture, combining discipline and delight, is the image which he should endeavor to present. Doing so, he does much for his society.

The aim of education is this sort of culture; and it is also the aim of literature. The study of the excellent sentence--or phrase or clause or paragraph or total literary performance--is also the study of literature, not only in its detail but in its broad sweep. Joy in fine style and language--defined so as to include their many varieties, from the most naive to the most urbane--is a way of leading into a study of literature. Formal and

linguistic considerations are scarcely ends in themselves: the philosophical implication or content of what is said is integral and all-important. This philosophical content is as broad as the universe itself. Where would literature be if great writers had always limited themselves to some specified competence? Where, for that matter, would education be, if scholars touched only that of which they are certain?

Freshman English, properly staffed, can lead the student into the life of culture. Excellent faculty are the major requisite of the course: highly cultivated people of broad interests who can, and do, write well. Hacks they must not be, for the course is not a trite course. It is a beginning of higher education, a start towards excellence, an expanding of experience in seeing and saying. If the course demands more good people than make themselves available, that is partly because it has too often had the status of a hack course.

The thinking that is now being done on the composition course can inspire people of high abilities. If enough money is made available, Freshman English will be improved, and the staff which teaches it will be improved. Nor will that staff be made up of the sort of people who are willing to settle for safety and a small salary in a "lower division" course, but of people who have their rightful place at all academic levels.

But money must be found. An accomodation which would eliminate or impoverish Freshman English is nothing less than a willingness to deny one of the strongest potential forces for human culture which the University and the Department of English possess. Money can be found, if the world of English scholarship really appreciates the fact that this course, probably more than any other, is the one which can improve the standards they seek to serve. The profession should make use of its great potential power, everywhere attested by its popularity with students, to preserve and to improve its first discipline. One of the assumptions which we should scrutinize most severely is the assumption that Freshman English should be inexpensively taught. It should cost more money, not less, so that it can preserve small classes and move towards seminar or even tutorial instruction. We should show our leadership in demanding more money and finding the staff to justify the demand; the results will show, not a narrowed, but an expanded competence. It will benefit not only the University but our entire culture. For it will have made our students aware, through the power of style and language, of the advantage of excellence over mediocrity, of humanity over the manifold forces of cultural dehumanization.

The student who can write well can manage his education. The emulation of great writing leads to artistic and intellectual excellence. It leads not to facts and their arrangement, but to the excitement of stating well the principles of which facts are only the basis. It leads to discipline and to power, not to statistical tables or social projections. It leads to the development of individuals, not to social man: which is another way of saying that it is an early step towards producing the uniquely educated human being without which our society cannot survive.

Freshman English has cost too little money; it should now cost a great deal more. Compromises which make it cost less will represent abdications of leadership, a failure to use the full power of the profession of English.

Let us not permit our profession to abdicate its responsibility. I propose a national committee to discover whether, without submitting altogether to administrative pressure for certain kinds of cooperative "leadership," Freshman English can be maintained and helped to do what we all know it can do.

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